THE PARKING METER STOOD THERE
LIKE A RUSTED SENTINEL OF INJUSTICE
The Broken
Meter Blues
FOUR STORIES COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

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Ovi Pulp

The Broken Meter Blues
The IT bandit
The unpaid supper
The art of the fake fundraiser

Four stories complete and unabridged

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The Broken Meter Blues

The parking meter stood there like a rusted sentinel of injustice, its face blank, its coin slot grinning like a crooked cop. Mei-Ling Chen leaned against it, arms crossed, her smirk wider than a getaway car's tire marks.

"Broken meter," she announced to the first victim, a sweaty businessman juggling a briefcase and a latte. *"That'll be a twenty-dollar fine. Cash only. No receipts."*

The man blinked. *"Since when do you work for the city?"*

"Since the city decided not to pay me enough to care," Mei-Ling said, tapping the meter. *"Listen. No click. No tick. Broken. That's a violation of… something. Pay up or I key your Lexus."*

The businessman hesitated. Mei-Ling pulled out a switchblade, pink, bedazzled, *very* threatening. He forked over the cash.

Score one for the Meter Maiden.

* * * * * * * * * *

This was Mei-Ling's genius. Find a busted meter. Stand there like authority. Collect "fines." No permits. No paperwork. Just pure, unadulterated *chutzpah* with a side of plausible deniability.

"You're a criminal," her best friend Rico had told her over tequila last night.

"I'm an entrepreneur," Mei-Ling corrected. *"The city's too lazy to fix their meters. I'm providing a service. Fear-based customer relations."*

Now, three hours into her shift, her pockets jingled like a slot machine payout. Then... *disaster.*

A cop car rolled up.

Not just any cop. *Officer Brickowski.* A man so dense, light bent around him.

"You," Brickowski growled, stepping out like a fridge with legs. *"You the meter maid?"*

Mei-Ling didn't miss a beat. *"Volunteer. Community service. Badge got stolen by a gang of raccoons. Tragic."*

Brickowski squinted. *"I don't like you."*

"I don't like me either, but here we are."

* * * * * * * * * *

Brickowski reached for his cuffs. Mei-Ling reached for her emergency plan, *a smoke bomb made from crushed-up sidewalk chalk and regret.*

POOF.

The street turned into a low-budget action scene. Mei-Ling bolted, cash flying like confetti at a mobster's funeral. Brickowski lumbered after her, knocking over a hot dog cart (*"MY CABBAGE!"* screamed the vendor).

She vaulted over a parked motorcycle, slid across a hood, and...

WHAM.

Face-first into Rico, who was *conveniently* stealing a bike.

"Get on!" he yelled.

"I hate you!" she yelled back, hopping on.

Brickowski roared, *"STOP OR I'LL..."*

"YOU'LL WHAT? THINK HARDER?!" Mei-Ling shouted as they peeled off.

* * * * * * * * * *

Back at Rico's "office" (a laundromat with a suspiciously clean money operation), Mei-Ling dumped her haul. *"We're rich!"*

Rico frowned. *"We're idiots."*

"Same thing."

Then, the door burst open.

Not Brickowski.

Worse.

The *actual* meter maid union.

A dozen angry women in neon vests, wielding ticket rolls like nunchucks.

"You've been impersonating city employees," their leader hissed. *"That's our grift."*

Mei-Ling sighed. *"Well, crap."*

* * * * * * * * * *

What followed wasn't a fight.

It was a *negotiation.*

Ten minutes later, Mei-Ling and Rico walked out ...alive, unharmed, and newly inducted into the *Meter Maid Mafia.*

"Fifty percent cut," Rico muttered. *"We're basically public servants now."*

Mei-Ling lit a cigarette. *"Worst. Heist. Ever."*

But as they strolled into the sunset, pockets lighter but futures brighter, one thing was clear, crime paid.

Just not as much as bureaucracy.

THE END

The IT bandit

Jim Thompson, self-proclaimed "Senior Cyber Solutions Architect" for *Microsoft-slash-Apple-slash-Whatever-Pays,* leaned back in his squeaky office chair, cracked his knuckles, and dialed another victim.

The phone rang twice before an elderly voice answered. *Perfect.*

"Hello, ma'am, this is Jim from Microsoft Security," he said, oozing fake concern. "We've detected *severe* malware on your computer. Hackers from *Ukraine* are stealing your cat photos as we speak."

A gasp. "Oh my Lord! What do I do?"

Jim smirked. *Hook, line, and sucker.* "Ma'am, I need you to go to your computer right now. Time is of the essence."

Cue the scam symphony.

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Jim's "office" was a dimly lit basement with a *World's Best Hacker* mug (stolen) and a half-eaten burrito (regrettable). His crew, Lenny "The Clicker" and Babyface Benny, watched as he worked his magic.

"Ma'am, I need you to type *totallylegitfix.com* ...yes, all one word... into your browser," Jim instructed, stifling a laugh.

Lenny snorted. "Man, how do these people fall for this?"

Jim shot him a look. "Shut up, Lenny. You couldn't scam a toddler out of a lollipop."

The victim, bless her soul, typed it in. Jim's screen lit up with remote access. *Jackpot.*

"Now, ma'am, you'll see some scary warnings. Just ignore them. That's the *hackers* trying to stop us."

She whimpered. "Oh dear, this is like *Mission: Impossible*!"

Jim smirked. "Exactly. But with *more* Tom Cruise energy."

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Just as Jim was about to drain her bank account, a new window popped up:

"REMOTE ACCESS INTERRUPTED. FBI CYBER DIVISION TRACING CALL."

Jim's blood froze.

Lenny paled. "Dude. *Dude*. We're screwed."

Jim's fingers flew across the keyboard. "No, no, no—this is a prank! Some script kiddie messing with us!"

Then his screen flickered. A message appeared:

"HELLO, JIM. YOU'VE BEEN SCAMMING MY MOM."

Jim's stomach dropped. *Oh no.*

A video feed loaded. A muscular dude in a *Hack the Planet* shirt cracked his knuckles. "I'm gonna make you wish you'd stuck to stealing candy."

Jim swallowed hard. "Uh… Lenny? Benny? *Run.*"

* * * * * * * * * *

The crew bolted like rats from a sinking ship. Jim's cheap dress shoes slapped against pavement as the hacker's voice boomed from his phone:

"YOU CAN'T ESCAPE THE INTERNET, JIM!"

Lenny tripped over a trash can. "I TOLD YOU WE SHOULD'VE STUCK TO PHISHING!"

Jim dodged a puddle. "NOT NOW, LENNY!"

A car screeched around the corner. The hacker? The cops? Jim didn't stick around to find out. He dove into a subway station, panting, his heart pounding like a drum solo.

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Jim thought he was safe. Then ...*BAM!* he smacked into a street vendor's cart, sending fake Rolexes flying.

The vendor glared. "You break, you pay, *idiota*."

Jim groaned. "Buddy, I *am* broke. That's why I scammed people."

The hacker's voice crackled from a nearby phone store's demo display:

"GAME OVER, JIM."

Sirens wailed. Jim slumped against the cart.

Lenny sighed. "Welp. We had a good run."

Jim rubbed his temples. "We scammed *grandmas*, Lenny. There's no 'good' in that."

* * * * * * * * * *

As cuffs clicked around his wrists, Jim sighed. The neon lights of the city blurred into one big *failure*.

The cop smirked. "Jim Thompson, you're under arrest for… well, being terrible at crime."

Jim nodded. "Fair."

Somewhere, a hacker laughed. Somewhere else, a grandma happily watered her plants, oblivious.

And Jim? He finally learned his lesson:

Stick to stealing Wi-Fi.

THE END.

The unpaid supper

The steak was medium-rare, the wine was a ’98 Bordeaux, and the bill was about to be someone else’s problem.

Olivia Martinez adjusted the strap of her little black dress, the one that said *classy* but whispered *felony*—and smirked at Liam O’Sullivan across the candlelit table. “You gonna eat that, or are we committing *two* crimes tonight?”

Liam, a man built like a retired boxer with the charm of a used-car salesman, stabbed the last bite of filet mignon. “Crime’s like dessert, Liv. Better when you take your time.”

The restaurant, *Le Grand Fiasco*, was the kind of place where the napkins cost more than their rent and the waiters sniffed at you like you'd just kicked their dog. Perfect for a dine-and-dash.

Olivia sipped her wine, eyeing the exits. "Alright, genius. What's the play?"

Liam wiped his mouth, leaned in. "Classic Irish goodbye. We walk out like we own the place, and if anyone asks, we're *very* offended they'd imply we didn't pay."

Olivia snorted. "That's your plan? *Bluffing?*"

"Worked for my marriage," Liam said, standing.

They strolled toward the door, Olivia's heels clicking like a countdown. The maître d', a skeletal man with a mustache thinner than his patience, frowned. "*Monsieur, Madame,* your check?"

Liam gasped, clutching his chest. "*Excusez-moi?* You think we're the kind of people who *dine and dash*?"

The maître d' hesitated. Olivia seized the moment, slapping Liam's arm. "I *told* you this place was racist!"

Chaos erupted. Waiters fluttered like startled pi-

geons. A busboy crossed himself.

They bolted.

The alley behind *Le Grand Fiasco* smelled like expired dreams and dumpster juice. Liam wheezed, hands on knees. "We're getting too old for this."

Olivia grinned, twirling the stolen bottle of Bordeaux. "Nah. We're just getting *better*."

Sirens wailed in the distance.

Liam sighed. "You hear that? The sound of *love*."

They vanished into the night, two shadows with full stomachs and empty morals, the way all the best criminals do.

THE END.

The art of the fake fundraiser

The diner smelled like burnt coffee and bad decisions, my two favorite aromas. I, Jessica "Jess" Murphy, sat in a cracked vinyl booth, stirring a cup of joe that had the consistency of motor oil. Across from me, Benny "The Lip" Marino was sweating like a sinner in church.

"You sure this is gonna work, Jess?" Benny dabbed his forehead with a napkin. "I mean, collecting donations for a fake kids' hospital? That's low, even for you."

I smirked. "Benny, my sweet, morally bankrupt friend, people *love* donating to sick kids. They just don't love checking if the sick kids exist."

The plan was simple: Pose as fundraisers for the *St.*

Sebastian's Children's Wellness Center (a name I pulled out of thin air), set up outside a grocery store with a clipboard and a sob story, and walk away with a haul that would make a televangelist blush.

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10 AM. Sunnyvale Grocers.

I adjusted my fake glasses, the kind that screamed *trustworthy professional* and pinned on a badge that said *"Jessica Wells, Fundraising Coordinator."* Benny, in a cheap suit two sizes too big, held a donation bucket with a picture of a sad-looking kid taped to it.

"Remember," I whispered. "Tug at their heartstrings, then their purse strings."

Our first mark was a middle-aged woman with a cart full of organic kale. Perfect.

"Ma'am," I said, oozing sincerity, "would you like to help save a child's life today?"

She blinked. "Oh! What's the cause?"

Benny jumped in. "St. Sebastian's, they treat terminally adorable kids with… uh…" He glanced at me.

"Rare boneitis," I said smoothly.

"Boneitis?" The woman frowned.

"Very tragic," I sighed. "Their bones… they just *melt*."

Benny nodded solemnly. "Like ice cream in July."

The woman's eyes welled up. "Oh my God, that's horrible! Here..." She shoved a twenty into the bucket.

And just like that, we were in business.

* * * * * * * * * *

12 PM. The Donations Roll In.

A construction worker dropped in a fifty. "For the little guys," he grunted.

A teenager handed over his lunch money. "I don't need snacks. Those kids need… whatever it is they need."

An old lady emptied her coin purse. "Bless you, dears."

Benny was vibrating with excitement. "Jess, we're killing it!"

I checked the bucket, overflowing with cash. "We're

gonna need a bigger bucket."

* * * * * * * * * *

2 PM. Enter Suspicion.

Then *he* showed up.

A guy in a suit, sunglasses, and a frown that could curdle milk. He stood by the store entrance, arms crossed, watching us like a hawk eyeing a couple of mice.

"Uh, Jess," Benny muttered. "We got company."

I kept smiling. "Just keep collecting, Benny. Confidence sells."

The suit marched over. "You two got a permit for this?"

I blinked innocently. "A permit?"

"Yeah. For soliciting donations."

Benny laughed nervously. "We're with St. Sebastian's! We help kids with… uh…"

"Boneitis," I supplied.

The suit didn't buy it. "Funny. Because I *own* Sunnyvale Grocers. And I've never heard of St. Sebastian's."

Oh.

Oh no.

* * * * * * * * * *

2:05 PM. The Great Escape.

The suit reached for his phone. "I'm calling the cops."

Benny panicked. "Jess? *Jess?!*"

I grabbed the bucket. "RUN!"

We bolted. Benny's oversized suit flapped like a startled penguin as we dodged shopping carts and screaming shoppers. The suit yelled after us, but we were already at the car.

I peeled out of the parking lot, tires screeching, Benny clinging to the dashboard like his life depended on it.

"WE'RE GONNA DIE!" he wailed.

I grinned. "Nah. We're gonna be *rich*."

* * * * * * * * * *

Epilogue: Counting the Loot

Back at my apartment, we dumped the cash on the table. Benny whooped. "We pulled it off!"

I lit a cigarette, savoring the victory. "Benny, people will believe anything if you sell it right."

He grinned. "So… what's next? Fake disaster relief?"

I exhaled a smoke ring. "Nah. I'm thinking… *save the whales*."

Benny groaned. "Jess, you're a monster."

I winked. "No, Benny. I'm a *professional*."

THE END.

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Thanos Kalamidas, a multipublished writer, cartoonist and illustrator; born and grew up in a picturesque neighbourhood on the mountainside of Hymettus in Athens, Greece. Then his life took him to Berlin, Germany and to London, UK for studies. After a brief stay in Yorkshire he moved his life to Paris, France while working in Tokyo, Japan and in Cape Town, South Africa. In the last 25 years he became a permanent Scandinavian resident and recently, in his glorious sixth decade, he moved to a scenic village in the Växjö area.

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